DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 780 FL 025 581

AUTHOR Roskams, Tim
TITLE Collaborative Interaction in Networked Writing Classrooms: The Student Experience.
PUB DATE 1998-01-31
NOTE 12p.; In: The Japan Conference on English for Specific Purposes Proceedings (Aizuwakamatsu City, Fukushima, Japan, November 8, 1997); see FL 025 575.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Computer Mediated Communication; *Computer Networks; *Cooperative Learning; *Electronic Classrooms; *English for Academic Purposes; *English for Special Purposes; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Local Area Networks; Questionnaires; Second Language Instruction; Student Attitudes; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Asia

ABSTRACT

Issues in teaching English academic writing in a networked classroom are discussed, particularly in the Asian context. Students (n=74) in four introductory classes in English academic writing in a Hong Kong university were surveyed concerning the usefulness of the networked writing laboratory to improve writing and the usefulness of their peers' comments on writing drafts. Aspects of the teaching technique investigated included the value of collaborative learning, time factors in computer-mediated communication, development of thinking skills, student interest and enjoyment of the experience; general writing skill development, and personal comfort with the delivery mode. Results indicate that while most students enjoyed collaboration in the real-time writing mode, over one-quarter felt it had not improved their writing skills. Students whose writing was more developed tended to find that feedback from other students was less helpful. Implications for classroom teaching and instructional design are discussed. The questionnaire is appended. Contains 11 references. (MSE)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED 424 780

# Collaborative Interaction in Networked Writing Classrooms: The Student Experience

Tim Roskams
English Language Teaching Unit
The City University of Hong Kong, China

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Thomas Orr
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)



**Abstract**

Networked writing classes are likely to become more popular in Asia with increased emphasis on collaborative learning and an institutional focus on technology. While the claims and counterclaims about the benefits of networked writing for EFL students are numerous, one thing is clear: establishing a networked writing classroom is not a matter of simply installing computers and providing technical facilities. A focus on such concerns does not answer the question whether networked technology is useful or feasible in an Asian context. This aim of this paper is to explore and analyse students' comments about their experience in the networked writing laboratory, in particular their opinions of the usefulness of networked writing to allow improvement in their writing and also to allow meaningful peer feedback. The data on which this paper is based are part of a larger set collected from four Introduction to Academic Writing classes at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. These comments also provide some indication of which of the claimed advantages and concerns of networked writing discussed in the literature are founded, and which may be baseless. While most students enjoyed collaboration in real time writing mode, over 25% did not feel that it had improved their writing. This and other issues that were raised by the students should assist administrators who are considering the implications of a move to a networked writing environment. They should also assist teachers who are working in the networked writing laboratory to prepare more effective on-line collaborative classroom activities.

## Networked Writing and Collaborative Learning

The use of networked writing in Asia is still in its infancy. This is surprising, as several Asian countries (including Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong) have high levels of computer ownership and an institutional focus on computer and information technology. However, given trends in the USA, where Blythe (1997) points out that "administrators have been rushing to add networked computer technologies..... to their repertoire of [writing] services," and the recent interest in the topic in journals and at conferences, an increase in the use of networked writing in Asia seems inevitable.

Networked computers in the writing laboratory provide students the chance to interact through writing in real-time to other students and the teacher. Networked computer classes (or synchronous Local Area Network (LAN) conferencing) have added a new and potentially interesting dimension to learner-centred second-language writing classes and the development of learner autonomy through written collaboration. Collaborative learning is claimed to be beneficial in L2 classrooms as it provides opportunities for modified input, it creates a low anxiety context, and provides more chance for language practise and more comprehensible output. But positive outcomes of collaborative learning are not automatic and Evelyn Jacob et al (1996)

FL 025 781

suggest that the reason that collaborative learning studies in everyday classrooms report mixed results is that their carefully planned implementation is not replicated in actual classrooms.

The networked writing classroom - conclusions from the literature However, a review of the literature on networked computers in the writing classroom shows that most writers are positive.....with qualification. Braine (1997), in a comparative study concluded that the networked laboratory produces better writing and more teacher and peer feedback than the traditional class, but that there was more improvement in essays in the traditional class. While he ascribed this to the fact that students' first drafts in the networked laboratory were closer to their ability 'ceiling,' it is not possible to attach too much significance to such comparative studies as there are many confounding 'situational' variables.

Peterson (1997) provides a balanced coverage of some of the issues involved in computer networking as a learning tool. These issues include the suitability of networked classrooms to meet ideal learning conditions through communicative effort in negotiating meaning; the development of learner-centredness and learner autonomy through a less-restrictive environment than traditional classrooms; increased interaction though the willingness of learners to take the initiative in discussion; the redefinition of relationships as learners gain more control over content and participation roles; increased authenticity of discourse compared with a pseudo-communicative nature of oral discourse in the teacher centred class; the equalising nature of the technology on a normal social discourse hierarchy; increased writing output and reading input; and enhancing increased personal engagement and discovery learning.

However, Peterson also points out limitations can arise from lack of computer and typing skills among students; a lack of technical support; information overload; and inability to deal with redefined conventions such as the absence of non-textual context clues. Lack of active teacher input can also lead to student apathy after initial excitement. Beauvois (1997) also discusses the drawbacks of networked writing laboratories. These include the unwieldy nature of the student output; lower control of content and learning direction than a teacher-driven classroom; problems for "auditory" learners with the almost entirely computer mediated input; and frustration with the technology. She also mentions that some learners (and teachers) may not feel comfortable with a learner-driven classroom, an observation which may be especially true in an Asian context (Roskams, 1996).

The literature does not appear to provide clear directions for language teachers. For example, Sullivan and Pratt (1996) point out that networked computers may have more advantages for the ESL writer than for the native speaker writer as they offer the less proficient speaker more time to think about what to "say." (p.492). But Ruth Kivela (1996) points out students' language limitations have an opposite effect: she notes that ESL/EFL students may have difficulty collaborating in writing, because of their slower processing and productive skills which keep them from participating fully. At Chinese University we observed that student output in the writing laboratory is more fragmentary and incoherent than in oral discourse

because of the time lag in responding to issues. In the voice of one student, "It is very frustrating that the discussion topic has changed when we are ready to send our message." Since some learners do not have time to adequately read and respond, they are forced to choose to focus on one or the other.

While the claims and counterclaims are contradictory, one thing is clear: establishing a networked writing classroom is not a matter of simply installing computers and providing technical facilities. A focus on such concerns will not solve the question about whether networked technology is useful or feasible in an Asian context. This aim of this paper is to explore and analyse the student voice, to provide some indication of which of the claimed advantages and concerns are founded, and which may be baseless.

**Subjects and Setting**

Four *Introduction to Academic Writing* (IAW) classes were surveyed. Each consisted of approximately 20 students (total = 74) attending a 13 week course at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. This course aims to develop informative and persuasive writing skills in English based on library research and was conducted in a networked writing laboratory. The laboratory consists of 23 networked computers - 22 for students and one teacher console - and the working platform is the *Daedalus* integrated writing environment (DIWE). Students used the networked computers to provide feedback on drafts of other students, and also to exchange ideas for assignments (e.g. working titles and tentative thesis statements) with the other students and the teacher, who would respond, leading to a whole group or small group discussion on the network. The discussion (or conference facility) in DIWE is known as *Interchange*. Smaller conferences of three, four, or five students were most often used to make the volume of information more manageable

**Methodology**

Students in the four classes were surveyed in the penultimate week of the term using a questionnaire. Students were asked give their feelings before using the networked computers, and reasons for any changes in feelings over the term. Students were also asked to comment on the usefulness of *Interchange* and do likewise for on the usefulness of suggestions on drafts of their work from other students in the group. Only two of the questions are analysed in this paper.

As participation in the survey was voluntary, there were a total of 64 responses from the 74 students (86% return rate). Student comments were collated and analysed. Based on this analysis eight classifications of comments (pertaining to the major focus of the comment) were derived as follows:

1. Collaborative Learning (C)
2. Time (T)
3. Thinking Skills (M)
4. Interest /Enjoyment (I)

5. Comments about Writing Development (W)
6. Personal Comfort with the Delivery Mode (P)
7. Curiosity (Y)
8. Unclassified (U)

Those comments which did not fall into any of the first seven classifications were 'unclassified.' If a comment dealt with two or more issues and could be split, this was done if the meaning did not appear to be changed by so doing. There are obvious limitations in this study due to problems with reflective questionnaires and a certain element of judgment being required to decide in which of the categories many comments fell, and even in some cases whether a comment was positive or negative. However, it was usually possible to place a comment without doubt. The category *Curiosity* was not used in this study as there is not clear positive or negative connotation from these comments.

## Student Impressions: The Usefulness of the Networked Writing Laboratory to Improve Writing

Students were asked to comment on the usefulness of *Interchange* for improving their academic writing in English. The comments were classified as follows:

**TABLE 1**

**Classification of Open Comments about the Usefulness of *Interchange* for Writing Improvement**

| CATEGORY | POSITIVE | NEGATIVE | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|
| Collaborative Learning (C) | 20 | 6 | 26 |
| Time (T) | 1 | 12 | 13 |
| Thinking Skills (M) | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| Interest/Enjoyment (I) | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Comments about Writing Development (W) | 5 | 1 | 6 |
| Personal Comfort with Delivery Mode (P) | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Unclassified | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| **TOTALS** | **34** | **25** | **59** |

In this question, students focused on the benefits of collaboration but had significant reservations about the time constraints that the technology imposed on them. Some typical comments were:

### Collaborative Learning (C)

- + Because we can read each other's writing through Interchange and can learn more from others.
- + I can learn from other students.
- + I can look at other peoples' opinions and recognise the mistakes by myself.
- + I can read others' writing and learn others' way of writing.

- + Improve my English through sharing essay with classmates.
- + More interaction with others, thus larger scope of opinions about the writing, also giving comment in the form of writing is practice of writing at the same time.
- + We can give opinion to each other and as there is no talking, the classroom is quiet.
- - I cannot really interchange with other classmates with the Interchange.
- - Only useful if my classmate is critical enough to point out what improvements I should make in my work.
- - Sometimes it's difficult to concentrate on a topic, since partners usually 'drift-around' the topic.

### Time (T)

- + My partners can give me comments immediately.
- - After we have finished our own work and typed into computer, there was little time to read the others writing.
- - Because I usually have not got enough time to read other students' writing.
- - Not good at typing. Thus using most of the time to type only 1 to 2 comments.
- - We will use much time in thinking and typing the answer and we have got not much time to see other people's idea.

### Thinking Skills (M)

- + Help us to think quicker
- + This help a lot in solving problems.
- + We can express our ideas immediately so that it can stimulate our thinking.
- + Can force us to think in English and write (type) in English.

### Interest/Enjoyment (I)

- + Using interchange can also make the lessons more interesting.
- - It's not so interesting.

### Comments about Writing Development (W)

- + It makes us type more carefully and grammatically.
- + Practices my written English.
- + We can 'writer' faster and therefore we write more and practice more
- + We can practice our writing skills during the process.
- - The language used in the Interchange is not as precise as those used in academic paper.

### Personal Comfort with the Delivery Mode (P)

- + Peer review is frank and reasonable, less pressure when facing comments.
- - Group discussion in words would be better and more efficient.
- - We can do the same thing even without the network computer.

### Student Opinions about the Usefulness of their Peers' Comments

Students were also asked to comment on the usefulness of suggestions on drafts of their own work from other students in the group. The results were as follows:

**TABLE 2**

**Classification of Comments about the Usefulness of Peer Response on the Network**

| Category | Positive | Negative | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Collaborative Learning (C) | 41 | 14 | 55 |

Most students found the collaborative learning in the NWL was a useful experience although some felt that they could not improve their writing through comments from their peers. Some typical observations on the value of peer comments were as follows:

#### Positive

- + some mistakes that I can't find by myself.
- + Comments collected help to improve the drafts.
- + Different points of views are collected for the essay.
- + Find out the mistakes that I have. However, sometimes, we will make some other mistakes.
- + Good to get some ideas that you never think about it.
- + I can discover some weaknesses in my essay that I can't find before.
- + I can hear more opinions from different people so as to improve the content of my work.
- + I will have improvement from their opinions.
- + Other students can help me to realise my careless mistakes.
- + Other students can point out the mistakes that I can't see and teach me the pattern which is better.
- + Other students comments are very useful as my English level is very limited.
- + They are able to pick up mistakes which are unaware by the writers. And feedback from reader is important.

#### Negative

- - Classmates may not take it seriously.
- - Comments are not always helpful.
- - I think that they are not concentrated correctly on my work.
- - It is quite difficult for your classmates to give professional comments.
- - Not all students are able to give better suggestion. It is more suitable for professor to do so.
- - Some classmates cannot give very appropriate or serious comments.
- - Sometimes their suggestions are not correct and they may misinterpret my meaning.

- - Time wasteful as other classmates sometimes do not give much help on improving the essay. If the other students do not prepare before the lecture; it is time wasting for the discuss part (very low productivity).

Analysis of other student comments showed that students whose writing was more developed tended to find that the feedback from other students was less helpful than vice versa.

## Implications

What are the implications for teachers and administrators from this brief survey of published research and from the comments of our students? Most importantly, while most of the students felt that the peer collaboration afforded by the networked writing laboratory was useful, more than one quarter did not and this is problematic if the networked laboratory is to be used as the major teaching mode in a process writing class. Our observations that the lack of usefulness of peer comments seems to be due to the inability of a student reviewer to be critical of a student writer's work - either due to limitations of language, or social convention, or inability to think critically and systematically about another's writing, even after a limited period of training.

The statements made by students do not necessarily express their full range of concerns about using the DIWE or peer feedback. But they do provide some interesting comparisons with the issues raised in the literature which emphasised the positive effects on collaborative learning and to a lesser degree the technical issues. All the major student concerns were at least mentioned in the works which were reviewed.

But the findings of this study indicate that while students have the same concerns mentioned in the literature, they view these in a different manner. For example, while the literature did not put much emphasis on the sorts of concerns that students might have about initially joining a networked class, another study using survey data from the same source as this one (Curtis and Roskams, 1997) showed that these concerns were frequently mentioned and many students initially felt quite uncomfortable. This discomfort was not generally about the style of learning or their changing role in a collaborative classroom (issues discussed in the literature), but about their computer competence. Even though nearly 90% of the students had used computers before, for an average of approximately 3 years, many were still anxious about using computers in a teaching/learning mode, including repeatedly mentioned concerns about slow typing speeds. Therefore, either before starting or at the start of networked usage, some time and resources may need to be put aside for such training and/or 'acclimatisation.'

The issues of culturally-contextualized assumptions about roles and responsibilities brought out in some of the literature did not seem to be as much of a direct issue as expected, with few students alluding directly to these concerns. In terms of collaborative learning, the literature tended to focus on empowerment and the learner-driven classroom. Generally however, students did not comment on this except a very few who did so negatively, preferring more teacher input. However, students were quite overall positive about collaboration, from first, the point of

view of the interest it generated in the classroom and second, the help that other students were able to offer them in improving their work in terms of both correctness and integrating a wider variety of opinions. But it is also clear that many students found that collaboration was a frustrating experience, particularly if their group members had lower language proficiency than they did or did not appear to take the collaborative tasks as seriously. In the latter case, if the teacher monitors group discussions, 'sorting' student comments by student (This can be done using *Interchange*) to make it apparent which students are not contributing effectively, the reason can be explored with the individual student.

When establishing the collaborative groups (after enough classroom activities for the students to get to know each other), it may be useful to consider whether the groups should be streamed according to language proficiency. This may lead to more effective collaboration in some groups but create some quite dysfunctional groups. If more advanced and beginning learners are mixed, it is necessary to explain to the more advanced learners that they should consider giving feedback as a useful learning experience and additionally, that the teacher will spend more time with them in exchange for their help to other students. At the very least, all learners should be carefully trained in discussion discipline and in providing the different kind of responses than they are used to in oral discourse. Students also need to know that the type of short and chatty email exchanges they are used to sending are different from the type of comment they need to send in order to give helpful and constructive feedback on another student's written work. But, equally, they also need to be aware of the importance of giving criticism carefully and tactfully.

Teachers should note that it takes time to set-up the activities on the network for each lesson in advance. The literature also pointed out some of the limitations on time during the actual classroom sessions, largely due to typing skills and slower language processing that students in this survey also commented on. This slowness was one of the major concerns of students. It is important for an instructor not to try to attempt too many activities in a normal lesson and to provide very clear instructions. Allied with the newness of the technology to some students, the necessity to process lot of written information from various sources, and then respond it, some students found it difficult to process all the information and became passive 'readers' or alternatively writers on topics that were little related to the group online discussion which had 'moved on' by the time they had responded. In the words of one student, "There may be times when you want to say something about one point and while you are typing the discussion has already shifted to another point."

In addition, it took time for students to clarify their perceptions of roles and responsibilities in the context of the networked writing lab environment. In the words of a student, "A serious problem arises when discussion is done on computer - it requires the group to be familiar with each other and have a good leader." Even though groups elected a leader and a time-keeper in each session, along with a clear focus, some never developed enough discipline to prevent the fragmentation of discussions that is mentioned above.

In terms of developing writing skills, students were mixed in their opinions. Many

appreciated the feedback from other students for both accuracy and improving the quality of ideas in composition, as well as forcing them to consider the reader more carefully. A few students also commented on the fact that the faster response forced them to 'think' more in English, although this requirement was a barrier to lower-proficiency students. Some found the difficulty in processing information to be a barrier to the participation needed for writing improvement. A few commented on the increased fluency that developed through practice, mirroring the comments in the literature about generating more written output than the traditional class.

The literature did not emphasise the novelty and interest of the environment to the degree that students commented on. However, the opposite side to this initial excitement is the problem of an initial interest later turning to boredom. It is clear from our findings that this is an important issue for teachers to address. Students need to know that initially the whole process may be slowed down until they are familiar with the system before an increase in collaboration efficiency can occur. In addition, activities need to be varied and the teacher needs to maintain an active presence in the class.

It is unrealistic to expect that more students can be served using the same resources or that client contact time can be decreased a result of using networked writing modes and collaboration/peer feedback or that all tutors and students will welcome the shift in roles that a move to networked writing entails or find the transition easy. However, the move to a networked writing environment may be a quite useful new avenue for student-student and student-teacher collaboration if there is a willingness to accept the need for time and resources to train staff and students in new roles as well as technical mastery of the environment, and if there is a commitment to ongoing technical support and assistance.

**Acknowledgement**

I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Ms. Fiona Lam in collating the data for this study and the generous assistance of a research grant from Chung Chi College of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. I am also grateful to my colleague Dr. Andy Curtis, also of the English Language Teaching Unit at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, who allowed me to use, for this paper, part of a data set which we collected jointly.

**References**

Beauvois, M. (1997). High-tech, high-touch: From discussion to composition in the networked classroom. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 10*(1), 56-69.

Blythe, S. (1997). Networked computers + writing centers = ? Thinking about networked computers in writing center practice. *The Writing Center Journal, 17*(2), 89-110.

Braine, G. (1997). Beyond word processing: Networked computers in ESL writing classes. *Computers and Composition, 14*, 45-58.

Curtis A. & Roskams, T. (1997). *Learning from students in networked writing laboratories.* (In press).

Ellis, R. (1990). *Instructed second language acquisition.* Blackwell, Oxford.

Jacob, E., Rottenberg, L., Patrick, S. & Wheeler, E. (1996). Cooperative learning: Context and opportunities for acquiring academic English. *TESOL Quarterly, 30*(2), 253-279.

Kivela, R. (1996). Writing on networked computers: Effects on ESL writer attitudes and apprehension. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching, 6.* ELTU, Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Moran, C. (1991). We write, but do we read? *Computers and Composition, 8*(3), 51-61.

Peterson, M. (1997). Language teaching and networking. *System, 22*(1), 29-37.

Roskams, T. (1996) *Chinese EFL Students' Attitudes to Peer Feedback and Peer Assessment in an Extended Pairwork Setting.* Unpublished working paper, Chinese University of Hong Kong

Sullivan, N., & Pratt, E. (1996). A comparative study of two ESL writing environments: A computer- assisted classroom and a traditional oral classroom. *System, 29*(4), 491-501.

**Survey Questions:**

How useful was using *Interchange* for improving your academic writing in English? Please give reasons for your assessment of its usefulness.

```
Using Interchange:  not useful <----------------> very useful

Usefulness:          1      2      3      4      5      6
```

Reason(s): _____

How useful was receiving comments and suggestions on the drafts of your own work from other students in the group.

```
Receiving Comments:  not useful <----------------> very useful

Usefulness:          1      2      3      4      5      6
```

Reason(s): _____